

June 13, 2004

Dear Ken Novack and Task Force Members:

I previously sent you numerous comments on improving the Strand Theatre, and I attended your open community meeting at the New Boston Pilot School.

I have some additional ideas that I would like to share with you as you summarize your findings in a final report at the end of this month.

A lot has been said about being in touch with the community. I would like to reiterate my previous suggestion that new Strand management consider doing community outreach outside of the Strand Theatre building. One way to get recognized around the community is to be in it. If the Strand management could co-sponsor or host or promote events in the community that would ultimately lead back to the Strand facility, that would be a win-win proposition. For example, the Grover Cleveland Middle School in Fields Corner is supposed to be the school of the performing arts. What a great tie-in for the school, to have artists-in-residence from the Strand, or instructors, go out the Cleveland to work on a program at the school, with the ultimate reward of further training, or a culminating show, at the Strand.

Similarly, I think that the Strand should re-establish its database of networking contacts. This list would include dance studios, local entertainment companies and promoters, music instructors both voice and instrument, theater troupes, etc. My suggestion is to strengthen community ties by having a Board member or a student intern compile these databases for networking.

There are many schools and religious groups that require youth to perform community service. Some examples include high schools, Catholic confirmation classes, Boy Scouts, and colleges. I think that the Strand could benefit from this pool of volunteers. To this end, the new management could register the Strand with these various organizations, as being a resource that these groups could consider when referring the youth for service projects.

How about making the Strand an art gallery, whether for permanent displays or for exhibitions and/or art auctions.

I have two ideas for drawing in a diverse type of audience. One idea is to become a home for "cult" movies like Rocky Horror Picture Show and Wizard of Oz and Sci Fi movie festivals. The second idea is to have satellite TV installed at the theatre so that it becomes a venue for international sporting events. Big crowds go to church sites and pubs to catch Irish sports. And there is a huge soccer following that would like to see the games without traveling to New York or even to Foxboro for local events featuring international teams. Both ideas draw in audiences which might not normally come to the Strand to see a concert or watch a play. But once introduced to the Strand, these folks may find it a venue of choice for other entertainment.

While this idea cannot be put into an RFP, I think that opening up links to the world of magic and illusion would make the Strand an interesting venue. Several magic events a year would give the theatre some varied notoriety. There is a network of performers, supported by a magic shop and studio near South Station that could help bring this idea to life. Then, bigger acts from outside of Boston can be brought in.

Thank you for considering some community input.

Sincerely,

Kevin J. Barry



May 27, 2004

Mr. Kenneth Novak
Chair - Strand Theatre Task Force
Boston, MA

Dear Mr. Novak:

The Board of Directors of Upham's Corner Main Street (UCMS) submits the following five-point program as its "Strategic Vision" for the Strand Theatre, a major institution and landmark in the Upham's Corner Business District. In all the economic restructuring planning for the Upham's Corner business district that UCMS has undertaken in the past five years, the Strand always has been identified as a key economic anchor business in the neighborhood. UCMS considers successful operation of the Strand to be a critical piece in our effort to develop a vibrant, profitable, safe and convenient retail and entertainment district for residents of Upham's Corner and customers citywide. Our strategic vision attempts to respond in a pro-active manner to the recent decision by the City of Boston to encourage the appointment of a new management system that will help the Strand to expand its programs, increase its audiences and remain in business long into the future.

The strategic vision that we propose has several major elements and each one is presented with supporting observations and recommendations. We believe that successful theater management at the Strand will be achieved when the business climate that supports the theater recognizes the need for careful study of the constraints and opportunities within the entertainment industry, especially as these relate to inner city theaters that appear to have been left behind by recent changes in entertainment. UCMS is confident that the Strand will thrive in an institutional environment that allows management to stay focused on delivering value in the areas we identify. With the foregoing in mind, we submit the following as the UCMS Strategic Vision for Strand Theatre Success.

1. Strengthening Strand Entertainment Program:

- o UCMS urges Strand Theatre management to establish a performance program that brings at least 150 major events at the theater each year. A major event is defined as any performance, conference or other gathering that draws an audience of at least 500 guests. UCMS also considers the promotion of an additional 100 performances and events with audiences of up to 500 persons an important component of successful operations of the theater.
- o UCMS requests that the new Strand management develops a system that encourages repeat business at the theatre. This system will engage producers who have delivered 'Major Events' in recent years and provide incentives for them to bring more performances to the theater on an annual basis.

2. Enhancing the Strand Production Platform:

- o UCMS requests that the City of Boston provides the Strand Theatre with the resources to outfit the theatre for concert performances. These improvements include but are not limited to a new computerized box office, a new lighting system and a modern sound system. These systems need to be in place within three months of the new management team taking over the Strand.

3. Enhancing Community Access:

- o UCMS considers the development of performance related activities that help to prepare local talent for the performance industry a major part of Strand Theatre's mission in Dorchester and the wider Boston community. Programs similar to Strand Teen Players should be reinstated by the end of 2004.
- o UCMS recognizes that the Strand has a critical role to play in assisting Upham's Corner non-profits and civic groups with their annual events and activities. Theatre management needs to consider the annual scheduling of well-established events such as the Tropical Rhythm Concert Series and Jazz Night Out, the Upham's Corner Summer Festival, the Upham's Corner Holiday Party for Children, the Dorchester Bay EDC Annual Fundraising Gala, the Latino Film Series, the Under-21 Dance Parties and other events as part of its agenda.
- o UCMS urges the Strand to analyze the price structure for tickets for performances with a view towards encouraging larger community participation in events.

4. Expanding Theater Support Services:

- o UCMS considers that the development of a viable parking plan is a very important piece in helping to build-up the audiences at theater performance. UCMS analysis shows that 400 parking spaces can be available within a 3-minute walk of the Strand for evening and weekend performances. These parking opportunities need to be coalesced into a single plan that is triggered to facilitate parking for 'Major Events'.
- o UCMS urges the Boston Police Department to provide security support for the Strand that is effective and convenient. The presence of BPD members for Strand events needs to cover street crossing at performances and security for vehicles in the four parking areas that will be part of the Strand parking plan.

5. Improving the Physical Plant:

- o UCMS believes that the City of Boston needs to fast-track proposed improvements at the theater to coincide with the first year of a new management system being put in place. These improvements need to include all the current problem areas identified by building managers and should also include a comprehensive overhaul of the seats in the theater. This is the time to reduce the theater's capacity to 1,200 and providing better seats to make the theatre more appealing to residents and visitors who are already more inclined to go elsewhere for evening and weekend entertainment.

UCMS has been involved with the recent managers of the Strand and has concluded from its own observation that the theater's operations were severely affected by the lack of resources. We believe that the theater's funding structure and personnel requirements need urgent review. The management team that emerges must have the support of the City of Boston, the foundation community and other sources of capital in order to perform in a effective manner. A future at the Strand that is built on ticket sales income and other sources of risky cash flows will only further expose the theater to a troubled future.

Representatives of UCMS welcome the opportunity to meet with the Task Force and look forward to scheduling a meeting with you by June 15, 2004. In the meantime, we appreciate your efforts to address the current problems of the Strand and trust that your recommendations will recognize the crucial position of the theatre in the Upham's Corner business district. Please call us at 617.265.0363 if there is a need for more information.

Very truly yours,

Hal Cohen
President of the Board of Directors

Colin M. Riley
Executive Director

May 20, 2004

Dear Ken:

I read with interest your open letter to the community in the May 13 edition of the Dorchester Reporter. I am not a frequent user of the Strand Theatre, but I saw a couple of shows last year and I produced one at the end of the year.

I am disappointed that I missed some earlier meetings about the future of the Strand, but I am going to make every effort to attend the one on June 1 at the New Pilot School.

My primary vision for the Strand is to be a place which can unite the many varied neighborhoods of Dorchester into a cohesive community. I would like to see this once grande dame become a magnet for Dorchester, and Uphams Corner, instead of a lightning rod.

During 2003 I set up the Dorchester Talent Contest Series. The mission was to run amateur talent contests in different neighborhoods in Dorchester and then have the Grand Strand Finals at the Strand Theatre where winners from each contest would compete at a final contest on the big stage at the big theatre. And since this was a Dorchester contest series, what better place to hold the finals than at the premiere performance center located right in Dorchester.

During the year I held five talent contests around Dorchester. Three more I had to pass on because I lacked the time and staff to do more, in this my inaugural year. I initially had hoped to do about 8 in the year. I held one in Ronan Park, at night under the lights on a stage, where more than 500 people attended. It was one of the main events held that day as part of the Ronan Park Multicultural Festival. A park which often has a bad reputation around Dorchester for drugs, gangs and violence, was 180 degrees the opposite and instead united many groups from the surrounding neighborhoods to gather together and enjoy the park.

Other contests were held at a Catholic Church hall, the Vietnamese American Community Center, a street corner at the Shawmut T station, and a Haitian Church sanctuary. At the end of December the top 3 winners from each contest competed at the Strand. The finals included two adult acts, over 55 years old each, and many teen and middle school aged contestants. The contest was filmed by the TV show "Strictly Hip Hop" and in fact the contest is being aired twice a week on cable channel 23 BNN every week for the month of May, right now. It airs at 10:00pm Saturdays and 3:00am Friday mornings.

My wildest hope was that since I ran all the contests with Apollo Theatre-styled judging, i.e, judging by audience applause, then the contestants would be the draws to bring out large crowds in order to improve their chances of winning. In this manner, each contest would draw a big crowd and the various factions in each neighborhood surrounding the contest site would come together in a cooperative setting for a good time while cheering

on their favored candidate. Then, with 5 neighborhoods being represented at the Strand Finals, the varied neighborhoods across Dorchester would unite at the once glorious locale for performance in Dorchester where it could be shown that all neighborhoods could get along together.

As I explained to Strand management during the year, it would be a win-win proposition, for the Strand, my contest series, and for Dorchester. All year long I advertised the Strand. Mention was made at every contest that winners would advance to the Strand Finals. Many thousands of flyers were printed, which included promos for the Strand. I wrote articles before each event and reviews of the contests afterwards, which were printed in the Dorchester Community News. Thus there were at least 10 articles written which included stories about the Strand. Then there were the paid ads in the DCN and the Dorchester Reporter. And all the pictures. And the stories before and after the Strand Finals, with more pictures, and TV coverage.

But for all the outreach I did on behalf of the Strand, my experience with, and treatment by, the Strand people was less than cooperative. You have heard many stories already, no doubt. So there is no need for me to pile on more.

I was offering the Strand an opportunity to sell itself to the community. And that is one thing that the new Strand should do. In this day and age, it isn't enough to say, "Hey come to me. I am a great place and this is a great locale." I think that the Strand also has to reach out into the communities. That is, I think that the Strand should run programming in the neighborhoods, under the auspices and direction and name of the Strand. And then the hook is baited to get these neighborhoods to follow up on their experience by continuing it at the Strand. I could go on with lots of thoughts but I will try to bring them up on June 1.

I also discussed with Strand management a concept of hosting debates onstage. I was impressed in 1997 to see the Strand used as a candidates night forum where those seeking various Dorchester elected posts sat on stage and answered questions from moderators and from each other. So I discussed with management about having various schools around Dorchester get a monthly debate series at the Strand. It could be like the contests between high school debating teams. Competing schools or organizations would be given a topic to research and a date to appear at the Strand. It would be things that were topical and would interest people to come hear and learn from. At the end of each debate, a voice vote of the audience would determine the winning debating group. Think of all the press that would be generated from a debating series from topics of the day. Reporters and politicians would come just to learn more on the topics for themselves, and the points can be summarized in the next day's papers. It would be like a local version of Faneuil Hall in the 18th century. And it would be a fabulous learning experience for the debaters, of any age.

I am also involved with a community art program in Dorchester, which would love to get involved with set designs and costumes at the Strand. This group has people experienced in both realms already. Many possibilities exist here.

I think that something the Strand needs is consistency. By this I mean, there should be some kind of programming going on that is always a part of the schedule. If someone thinks about dance, puppetry, teen socials, debates, fashion shows, antique displays, or whatever, they can always say, "oh yeah, that is always the last Friday of every month, or every Monday morning, etc." It is fine for the Orpheum Theatre to book different events all the time and then you have to read the newspaper ads to see what is coming. But for a local theatre trying to establish its presence, I think that there should be some regular programming also. So kids can say, "It's Saturday night; that's when the talent contests are run at the Strand."

Another reason I am big on having the Strand reach out into the communities with its programming, and to have the Strand have some regular programming, is around the whole problem of youth violence in Dorchester. I have some ideas for Commissioner O'Toole about how to keep kids busy and engage them in worthwhile activities. Programming at and with the Strand is on my list of discussion points. Again, this could be a win-win proposition. If someone likes the idea of involving youth with innovative programming at the Strand, it stands to reason that funding would be found for it. Maybe it would come from a CDBG grant, or a public safety grant, or a film industry award. But we all know that the Strand could use the money.

Thank you for asking for some community input and reading my ideas. I look forward to the Strand expanding its presence in Dorchester.

Respectfully,

Kevin J. Barry

MEMORANDUM

TO: Councilor John M. Tobin, Jr. Chair
Committee on Arts, Film, Humanities and Tourism, Charlotte Golar-Richie/ DND, Susan Hartnett/ACD, Councillors, Yancy, Turner & Arroyo

FR: Yasmin Dixon, Artistic Director, Saba International Theatre (SIT)

RE: Docket #0486-Order regarding the future of the Strand Theatre

DA: May 6, 2004

Pursuant to stated interest in soliciting stakeholder input “later in May” for future RFP solicitation and management of the transition process at the Strand, I respectfully submit the following.

For the record my name is Yasmin A. Dixon. I am the producing artistic director of Saba Int’l Theatre (SIT), which is a sole proprietorship. My past association with the management of the Strand Theatre has included that of producer of a play *Andromeda* for the Strand Morning Series Program and as a drama instructor for the Arts in the Afternoon Program of the Harriet McCormick Center for the Performing Arts. As such I have interfaced with the management of the Strand Theatre in is dual capacity as a theatre rental company and as a non-profit cultural and educational performing arts institution.

It was in my capacity as a producer that I became acutely aware of the leadership vacuum and lack of non-profit management experience at the Strand. While I was initially approached by Vicky Jones for a play to fill their Morning Series roster in May 2000, I was enthusiastically supported in this process. “I don’t care if it has two people in it, it has to go on.” By November 2000, the tune had changed to “are you still interested in doing this play and if so, you will have to raise your own money. I was still interested and I did raise my own money.

Not only did I raise my own money, but my proposal sufficiently interested The Tomfordhe Foundation, such that were interested in cultivating a relationship with the Strand beyond the mere production of my play. Due to lack of experience, ignorance or gross underestimation of the color of the goose that was laying the foundation for their golden egg, Jones & Company proceeded to violate the terms of their contract with (SIT) by refusing, marketing, box office and technical/administrative support. Regardless, administrative systems were not in place and even staff meetings seemed to be rare and seldom occurrences.

The fault for “this and many other scandals” I believe lies squarely at the feet of the Strand’s Board, the number, names and performing arts experience of which are still a mystery to this day. It has now become abundantly clear that “The Strand” comprises two entities and engages plural municipal jurisdictions; this fact alone should indicate the need for a managing director of one and a producing director of the other. Their common ground is the physical plant and calendar and hours of operation. **That both entities (the Strand Theatre and the Harriet McCormick Center) have time sensitive needs in various forms and levels of importance is a Board prioritization issue and the area that requires the most sensitivity to community interests and input.**

From what I have gathered, while the Strand was “given over” to the Uphams Corner neighborhood to serve as a space for youth performance activities, church services, the occasional ‘chitlin circuit play or gospel concert, the city allowed it to be leased in its dilapidated condition. Once a vision of bringing “high brow” cultural events to the Strand to serve as a catalyst of economic revitalization was expressed, rehabilitating the building became a necessity and improvements were rightly made. When the first “high brow” event, the Pro-Arte Chamber Orchestra failed in its fundraising kick-off capacity, (because it did not appeal to local tastes and there has never been a broad black or ethnic “culturati” to support theatre, opera, ballet etc.) – the immediate connection to audience development was not made.

An approach to audience development could include the incubation of emerging local black theatre, dance, & opera companies that can provide programming and training for youth and create the forum and demand for the training of community residents in theatre/entertainment related jobs. Behind the stage: set, light, and costume designers, electricians, gaffers, stagehands, painters, carpenters, stitchers. In front: house managers, ushers, concession vendors, box office management. On stage: Actors, dancers, singers, directors, producers, stage managers. Theatre is labor intensive and partnerships with labor/job training service agencies are potential avenues of funding in the absence of direct funding for the arts.

The establishment of resident local theatre companies was significant in bringing diverse audiences to the BCA. Because The Strand does not have the advantage of multiple locations and spaces from which to generate revenue, **my first suggestion to any new Board/management team at the Strand would be the construction of a children’s theatre/rehearsal space in what is now the audience reception area. This would not have to be a costly conversion and could be undertaken by any competent Technical Director.** The “chitlin circuit plays, the church services, DNC activities are legitimate sources rental income streams, but some of the fashion shows, boxing matches, teen parties would be better served by the lodge further up Columbia Rd.

Though the Strand Board and the taskforce have mentioned the Apollo theatre as a model for the future of the Strand, I would venture to add Woody King’s New Federal Theatre and its relationships to the Abrons Art Centre on the lower east side as a better model of balancing commercial and community arts interests and participation. Though I could not venture to comment on the current status of that relationship, The New Federal

Theatre has served as a launching pad and training ground for black artists both in front and behind the curtain.

There is a real need for theatre training in the Boston arts community in general and the black/ethnic arts community in particular. Uses of the Strand should be appropriate to its design and function as a theatre. It is not nor should it be regarded as a “community Fleet center”. Boston will, in the coming months be in the national spotlight and the frenzy of construction in recent years denotes its attempts to be regarded as a world class city. The arts and Boston artists deserve the same “world class” support, attention and dollars.